

It was day 4 of vacation bible school at my home church in Woodinville, Washington maybe 10 years ago. It was a safari theme and each day I gathered the kids into a tent as we learned about a different section of the Lord's Prayer. We had come to the part of the prayer that says, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." I had been explaining what temptation means to a group of 7 and 8 year-old children and offered the idea that the devil may not be an actual physical creature, but instead that temptation might be more like that little voice in our heads that comes up with ideas that we know are bad. It's the voice that says "the walls in the hallway would be a great place to try out our new markers" or "go ahead and play video games instead of doing homework." I suggested that there might not be an actual devil at all but that we experience temptation anyway. The child next to me had a puzzled look on his face and boldly asked "If there's no devil, then who is taking care of hell?" We had a fantastic conversation about how lots of people believe lots of different things and that some people, including our Jewish siblings, don't believe that there is a literal hell. Instead, hell might be what we experience during our earthly lives when we choose paths that lead us farther away from the lives God calls us to - paths of discrimination, greed, self-absorption, exploitation, and violence just to name a few.

So, what then do we do with this piece of scripture? What are we to make of this story that shows up in 3 of the 4 gospels, which depicts the devil tempting or testing Jesus in the wilderness at the end of 40 days and nights of fasting and solitude? Let's start at the beginning. You'll notice that the first sentence in our text this morning begins with the word "then". "Then Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." The word "then" tells us that this is a continuation of a previous story; it is connected to something that happened just before our text begins. That previous story is the baptism of Jesus. Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan river and as he comes up from the water, the scripture says that the heavens opened up and the spirit of God descended like a dove, and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The very next sentence in the Gospel of Matthew after God's proclamation of Jesus as God's son is the beginning of our text for this morning. "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."

That same spirit that alighted on Jesus at his baptism then guides him to the desert wilderness. New Testament Professor Douglas Hare writes that this passage should not be considered historical fact. The intent of including this story in the Gospel is not to convey an event that really happened in Jesus' life. Instead, Professor Hare states that this piece of scriptures is a piece of midrash. Midrash were stories told in the Jewish tradition as ways of interpreting scripture. As a piece of midrash, this story of Jesus in the desert is an attempt by the author of Matthew's Gospel to interpret and explain what happened at the baptism of Jesus.

As Jesus is baptized, God proclaims, "this is my Son." What does that mean? The author is attempting to answer the question "What does it mean for Jesus to be the son of God?" According to the Roman Empire, the Emperor was the son of God. The official title of Caesar Augustus in Greek documents was "Emperor Caesar Augustus, son of god." An inscription from Turkey refers to Augustus as "The Emperor Caesar, son of god, Augustus, ruler of all land and sea." People in the first century had seen what it meant to the Romans to be the son of God and this story in Matthew serves the important purpose of showing how Jesus would fill that role in a completely different way.

Each temptation invites Jesus to define his calling as the Son of God in a limited way, to put his ministry and his life inside a box. For example, Jesus knows that while bread or food in general is necessary to sustain life. We know from other accounts of Jesus' ministry like the feeding of the multitudes, that Jesus understands the need for people to eat. Food keeps us alive. But that's all it does. To live on bread alone is to merely survive. Yes, Jesus was called to take care of people's physical needs but the nourishment for people's spirits was and is just as important. Jesus' call was to remind us that we are called to seek nourishment of our souls through our relationship with God in addition to making sure that everyone has enough food. As we listen for the ways in which God is still speaking to us and seek to experience the movement of God's spirit in and through us, and then live into the invitations God extends to us, our lives become about more than survival. We begin to live into the fullness of God's intention.

Skipping to the third temptation, the devil offers Jesus control of all the nations of the world. One of the commentaries about this text asked the question, “is that something the devil had the power to offer or is the devil lying?” This question broke open this story for me. How often do we believe the lie that evil has ultimate power? In fact, the Greek word “diabolos” which is translated as the devil, is actually an adjective that means “prone to slander” or if turned into a noun, means “false accuser.” The devil is, by definition, a liar. Whether we define that entity of evil as something metaphorical or something literal, the voice of evil is manipulative and deceitful. If we believe that evil is the most powerful force in creation, then that is certainly cause for despair. There is certainly evidence that might lead us to believe this to be true. We see humans acting in ways that are contrary to God’s goodness every day. Both in the news and sometimes in our personal lives. We see evil manifesting in larger systems like mass incarceration, and exploitation of the earth’s resources. We might be tempted to believe that evil has the last word or that we are too small and powerless to do anything about it.

But Jesus knows better. Jesus knows that God’s purposes are life-giving and good. That while humans are flawed, we are created in God’s own image as God’s beloveds. Jesus calls the devil’s bluff and reaffirms that God is the only one to be worshipped. Not wealth, not power, not fame. The message of the Gospel asserts this truth over and over again. Death and destruction do not have the last word. We are created to be messengers of love and compassion. We belong to each other as children of God and no lie from a slandering devil can change that. The question is whether or not we live as if we believe it. Do we despair and wallow in cynicism? Or do we show up in the world boldly proclaiming that love is the ultimate truth? Do we believe the lie that we aren’t enough, the lie that we are too small to matter? Or do we believe that we were created for great purposes of creating good in the world?

This story of the temptation of Jesus is not only a story about our own temptations and the divine call to resist evil in all its forms, but to illustrate the very nature of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus is not the son of God with the purpose of ruling over earthly kingdoms like a dictator or an emperor. Jesus is the son of God to call us to seek love in the right places. To be both receiver and givers of God’s love in our

relationships with those closest to us and in our relationships with people we might consider strangers or aliens. May we be strengthened with the sustenance that is God's love. May we find our worth in the love of our Divine parent whose grace and mercy seem to defy our comprehension. And may we seek to resist the allure of power, and instead seek a love of service and humility. For God's love is more nourishing than an bread and more life-giving than any possession. God's love does not need to be proven or tested but instead live out in our daily lives. God's love is a transformative power for peace and justice, that cannot be matched by the kingdoms of the world. May we live into our calling to be creatures of God's love and resist the forces that tell us we are anything less.